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Beyond the "Repeater" Label: Amplifying Student Perspectives on Grade Repetition and Protective Factors in Ghana

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Corresponding Author:	Daniel Owusu Kyereko University of York York, UNITED KINGDOM
First Author:	Daniel Owusu Kyereko
Order of Authors:	Daniel Owusu Kyereko
	William C Smith
	Ishmael K Hlovor
	Richard Okai
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Abstract:	This qualitative case study explores the lived experiences of students in Ghana who have repeated a grade, using labelling theory as a lens. Labelling theory posits that deviance arises from the social meanings and stigma attached to labels, rather than inherent characteristics. Through semi-structured interviews with 40 students who have repeated a grade, the study examines how the "repeater" label shapes students' self-perceptions, interactions, and educational trajectories. Findings illustrate the marginalising effects of labelling, including diminished self-efficacy, social stigma, and weakened school connections. However, protective factors like parental involvement, teacher support, and school interventions mitigated negative labelling impacts. The study underscores how labels are socially constructed and can be reshaped through supportive practices that challenge stigma and promote empowerment. By centering student voices, the research informs efforts to create more inclusive educational environments that recognize labelling's powerful influence on students' experiences and outcomes.
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Response to Reviewers:	

Response to reviewers

1. The extraneous double quotation mark on page 14, paragraph 1, has been removed.
2. We have also conducted a thorough review of the manuscript to ensure consistent use of quotation marks.

Beyond the "Repeater" Label: Amplifying Student Perspectives on Grade Repetition and Protective Factors in Ghana

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Beyond the "Repeater" Label: Amplifying Student Perspectives on Grade Repetition and Protective Factors in Ghana

Daniel Kyereko

University of York

William C Smith

University of Edinburgh

Ishamel Hlovor

University of Education, Winneba

Richard Okai

Emerging Public Leader Group

1. Introduction

The decision to retain or promote a student to the next grade level is a complex issue with far-reaching implications for the child's academic, social, and emotional development. The practice of grade repetition, also known as grade retention, has been a longstanding yet unevenly applied approach across global educational systems, with its prevalence and acceptance varying markedly based on historical, cultural, and policy contexts. While proponents argue that it provides struggling students with an opportunity to master the necessary skills and knowledge before progressing to the next level, critics contend that it can have detrimental effects on students' self-esteem, motivation, and overall educational outcomes. In many sub-Saharan African countries, for instance, repetition has been commonly used as a mechanism for quality control, especially in the early grades, though research has increasingly questioned its long-term effectiveness (Sunny et al. 2017; UIS 2012; Crouch et al. 2022).

One of the most frequently cited negative consequences of grade repetition is an increased likelihood of school dropout, particularly in the global south, where the practice is more prevalent (UNICEF 2014; Williams, Abbott, and Mupenzi 2015; Bennell 2023). This is especially concerning given that dropout rates in these regions are already high, and grade repetition often compounds existing socio-economic challenges, such as poverty and limited access to educational resources (Zuilkowski et al. 2016; Sunny et al. 2017). Initiatives, such as the Global Out of School Initiative (UNICEF & UIS 2015), have identified repetition as a primary risk factor for predicting which students are most likely to disengage from formal education prematurely. Studies across sub-Saharan Africa have found that repetition often leads to students becoming overage for their grade level, which in turn increases the risk of dropout (Zuilkowski et al. 2016; Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah 2009). However, not all students who repeat a grade inevitably drop out, suggesting the existence of protective factors—such as sustained parental encouragement, increased teacher attention, peer support, and access to remedial or extra instruction—that enable some students to persevere and continue their educational journey despite the challenges posed by grade repetition. These kinds of support can help students feel less isolated, rebuild their confidence, and stay motivated in school. To guide this investigation, we pose the following research questions: How do students who have repeated a grade in basic education in Ghana experience and respond to grade repetition, and what factors contribute to their continued engagement in education despite the challenges associated with being labelled as a “repeater”? This study aims to explore the lived experiences of students who have repeated a grade in basic education in Ghana. While contextually grounded, the findings contribute to

broadener understandings of how repetition policies are experienced in under-resourced settings globally. The study identifies recurring challenges—such as inadequate student support, inconsistent policy implementation, and the stigmatizing effects of grade repetition—that are common across many low- and middle-income countries (Author1 2023). These shared dynamics allow the Ghanaian case to illustrate general patterns with broader relevance, particularly in post-colonial education systems where grade retention remains a tool of quality control.

By employing the lens of labelling theory (Becker 1973), we seek to understand how the label of "repeater" is conferred upon students and how the social meanings and stigma associated with this label shape their educational experiences and outcomes. Labelling theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how institutional practices and societal perceptions can influence students' self-concept and educational trajectories, particularly in contexts where grade repetition is common but poorly understood (Messiou 2012; Lauchlan & Boyle 2007).

This article begins by defining grade repetition and providing estimates of its global scale. This is followed by reviewing literature on the relationship between repetition and dropout, as well as other effects of grade repetition that may help us better understand the link. Ultimately, much of the evidence, however, comes from the perspectives of teachers or parents. This is followed by an explanation of the labelling theory and how it relates to this work. Our methods section lays out how we engage with repeated students to ensure we are hearing their firsthand experiences. Results then present how students have understood, reacted to, and seen the effects of being repeated. The concluding discussion finishes the article by summarising the identified protective factors and emphasising the importance of study context when interpreting the effects.

2.Literature Review

2.1. How prominent is grade repetition?

Grade repetition or retention is the practice of requiring a student who fails to meet the academic standards for a given grade to repeat that grade in the following year (Ahmed & Mihiretie 2015; Santos et al. 2022). Grade repetition has been a topic of educational research since at least the 1920s (Smith & Herzog 2014) but has become more prominent as a policy, in part due to concerns that automatically promoting students to the next grade has led to lower standards for education (Jimerson & Ferguson 2007).

While different definitions and measurements can make comparing and monitoring repetition rates difficult (Cardoso 2020), the numbers that have been shared suggest repetition is regularly practiced in many countries. A global estimate from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS 2012) suggested that in 2010, 32.2 million primary-grade students were repeating their grade. A more recent paper by Pipa and Peixoto (2022) suggests that most countries have reduced repetition rates over the past decade. Still, repetition rates continue to be higher in the global south, including former colonies in Africa and Asia (Sunny et al. 2017). There is large variance both within a country (Jimerson & Ferguson 2007) and across countries in the same region. For example, past estimates suggest that only one in fifty students repeat a grade in Tanzania while greater than one in three students repeat a grade in Burundi and Malawi (Sunny et al. 2017; UIS 2012). Crouch and colleagues (2022) have suggested that these numbers may be misleading, with the actual repetition rates likely being up to twice as high as the officially reported rate in many countries, including Ethiopia and Burundi.

2.2. What are the effects of grade repetition?

The effects of repetition on students who repeat are mixed (Canegem et al. 2021; Kretschmann et al. 2019; Smith & Herzog 2014). The limited studies that point to positive effects of grade repetition indicate that repetition can provide more time for students to mature (Canegem et al. 2021) or boost student motivation (Pipa & Peixoto 2022). Reflections of US high school students who were retained in elementary school were mainly positive, with students discussing the benefits of emotionally catching up with their peers (Smith & Herzog 2014). Also in the US, Wu and colleagues (2010) found that teachers rated repeaters more positively on a measure of behavioral indicators. Student motivation may increase as students recognize the risk of retention and work to avoid it (Carl 2016) or through feeling that they have a fresh start following repetition (Ehmke et al. 2017). Goos and colleagues (2013) find that motivation may increase as the familiar setting helps students finally experience some academic success.

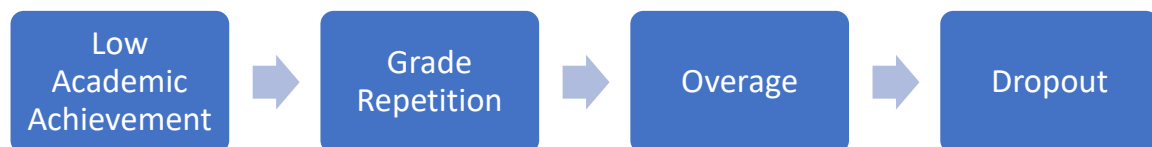
2.2. Understanding the relationship between grade repetition and dropout

Despite some proponents of grade repetition suggesting that it can improve repeaters' academic performance, the evidence to support this claim is limited. Some more recent research, using higher quality designed studies, finds small positive associations

(Kretschmann et al. 2019), but overall, the preponderance of evidence points to no relationship (Jimerson & Ferguson 2007; Kretschmann et al. 2019; Wynn 2010). This indicates that the poor academic performance that prompted the repetition is generally not alleviated post-repetition.

Low performance, therefore, is both a prompt for and maintained through the repetition process. Knight and Obidah (2014) exploring the relationship between students in three Caribbean islands found a strong relationship between poor performance and retention, with repeaters more likely to not improve and then drop out. Consistently across the literature, repeaters are associated with a high level of dropout (Canegem et al. 2021; Jimerson et al. 2002). As repeating a grade often makes repeating students older than their peers, it is not a surprise that most children who drop out are overage (UNICEF & UIS 2015; Zuilkowski et al. 2016), as found in Malawi (Sunny et al. 2017). The risk of dropout also tends to aggregate over education levels. As students progress, there is more time for them to repeat a grade or drop out and re-enter, increasing the likelihood they are overage. Figure 1 summarizes the main connections made in the literature connecting grade repetition and dropout.

Figure 1: The Assumed Path to Dropout



Less clear, however, is exactly what happens between students repeating a grade and dropping out. Overage may be a simple measure for predictive purposes, but it does little to explain why some students drop out and others stay in school. Research examining the socio-emotional, academic, and economic outcomes of repetition may help us understand this black box.

Students tend to position themselves both socially and academically in relation to their surrounding peers, suggesting that the repetition context and the response from peers

(and teachers) can strongly impact repeaters. Peer and social stigmatization is a common experience for repeaters, with the OECD indicating that grade retention "tends to stigmatize repeaters, undermining their self-esteem and sense of belonging at school, and reinforcing their disengagement from the learning process" (OECD 2018, 41). Teasing from peers was reported by repeating students in Kenya (Zuilkowski et al. 2016) and Ghana (Dunne & Ananga 2013). The following quote from an interview with a young Ghanaian man by Dunne and Ananga (2013) illustrates how repetition and overage combine and lead to negative interactions with peers: "...now I'm getting old and all these children at school are so young, and I feel bad when I am learning with them. Any time you make a mistake, all the class laughs at you" (202). Similar to this student, studies focusing on the sense of belonging indicate that repeaters feel more isolated and disconnected from their school (Pipa & Peixoto 2022; Santos et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2010).

Repetition can also lead to decreases in students' self-efficacy and academic self-concept. Self-efficacy can be defined as "people's beliefs in their ability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and environmental events" (Eric 2020, 7). It can be domain-specific, with individuals feeling differing levels of control over their academic and social life (Carroll et al. 2009). Decreased self-efficacy has been found among repeat middle school students in Portugal (Rosario et al. 2013), relative to non-repeaters, with similar results found in Ghana (Eric 2020). Ellsworth and Lagace-Seguin (2009) found that differences in academic self-efficacy tended to disappear over time. Somewhat similar to academic self-efficacy is academic self-concept, defined as "the perception that a student has about his or her own academic abilities" (Kretschmann et al. 2019, 1433). Some researchers, most notably Marsh (Marsh et al. 2008; Marsh et al. 2014), have found support for an increase in academic self-concept as students readjust their frame of reference to their new, younger, less academically experienced peers – in what is known as the big-fish-small-pond effect (Marsh et al. 2008) – others, such as Canegem and colleagues (2021) and Kretschmann and peers (2019), found a negative relationship between retention and academic self-concept, albeit with the relationship dwindling over time in the later study.

Finally, as children get older, there may be increased economic and opportunity costs for themselves and their families (Pipa & Peixoto 2022). Children in the labor force are more likely to be out of school (Guarcello et al. 2008), with the child's role playing a more important economic role for the family as they get older. Both paid and unpaid

work are associated with repetition and dropout. For instance, Author 1 and colleagues (2022) indicate that students working domestically are more likely to repeat in Ghana

2.3. Understanding the student experience

While numerous potential explanations exist to elucidate the relationship between repetition and dropout—such as greater stigmatization, lower sense of belonging, lower self-efficacy, lower academic self-concept, and greater economic responsibilities—the majority of evidence tends to be presented by educators or parents (Ellsworth and Lagace-Seguin 2009). The available evidence often relies on a narrow quantitative metric that captures only a fraction of the student experience, with a genuine voice from students themselves notably absent.

It is crucial to move beyond the perspectives of teachers and parents, as the viewpoint of students experiencing grade repetition is likely to differ from that of an external observer (Ellsworth and Lagace-Seguin 2009). However, when students are included in studies, their participation is usually limited to quantitative surveys, which provide only a partial glimpse of their experiences. This limitation is evident in studies on repeaters in the US (Jimerson & Ferguson 2007; Wu et al. 2010), Portugal (Pipa & Peixoto 2022; Rosario et al. 2013; Santos et al. 2022), Belgium (Canegem et al. 2021), Germany (Kretschmann et al. 2019), Canada (Ellsworth and Lagace-Seguin 2009), and Malawi (Sunny et al. 2017).

Among the scarce qualitative studies that have interviewed students, Palowski and colleagues (2013) found that repeated students in Germany generally had a negative experience. This included feelings of abandonment by their teachers and perceiving grade repetition as a personal setback detrimental to their academic motivation. These findings contrast with a phenomenological study of repeaters in the US (Smith & Herzog 2014), which revealed that those retained in elementary school recognized many benefits to their experience when asked later in high school. They did not view their repetition as a distraction or derailment but simply as an extension of their education.

A rare qualitative study of repeaters from a global south country is the recent master's dissertation by Eric (2020). Through interviews with basic school repeaters in Ghana, they found that interviewees tended to identify positively with the academic benefits of their repetition experience but negatively with the more social or psychological aspects. Repeated students pointed to the desire to stay with their friends and concerns with social pressure and ridicule from peers as reasons they would have preferred to move on

2.4. This Study

To gain deeper insights into the student experience of repetition and identify factors that shield them from dropping out, this study conducted interviews with current school attendees who had previously repeated a grade in basic school in Ghana. Grade repetition has been a longstanding practice in Ghana, dating back to the country's independence in 1957 (Author1 et al. 2022). Estimates of grade repetition vary over time and across grade levels. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE 2018), at least one out of ten students repeats their grade at most education levels, with a peak of 37% repeating kindergarten year one. Similar to many other countries, grade repeaters in Ghana face an increased risk of dropout (UIS 2012). An estimate suggests that around 20% of children in the country have either dropped out or never enrolled in school (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah 2009). Overage is identified as both a contributing factor to repetition in Ghana (Author1 et al. 2022) and a reason for dropout. Among a sample of 89 children who had dropped out before the age of 16, 26% pointed to repetition as a key factor, while 34% identified overage (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah 2009).

Confusion exists regarding the country's policy on grade retention, both among researchers and practitioners. In an effort to depart from the British colonial model of education and respond to structural adjustment programs from the World Bank, education reforms in 1987 in Ghana began to emphasize automatic promotion (N'tchougan-Sonou 2001). The current understanding is that the government follows a mandatory promotion process unless retention is mutually agreed upon with parents or guardians (Eric 2020), and this should only occur in exceptional cases (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah 2009). However, research with students and teachers in Ghana reveals clear confusion. Author1 and colleagues (2022) find that teachers in different schools interpret, comprehend, and apply national guidance on this matter differently. Despite the encouragement of automatic promotion, grade repetition remains a common practice in Ghana. To provide clarity on the practices and processes surrounding grade repetition, the country's 2018-2030 Educational Strategic Plan indicates that "a policy on repetition will be designed and linked with plans for remedial instruction provision" (MOE 2018, p. 23). While repetition policies vary across nations, the challenges identified—such as policy-practice gaps, unclear benchmarks, and

inconsistent implementation—mirror similar issues reported in other contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (Crouch et al. 2022; UIS 2012; Pipa & Peixoto 2022). "These policy gaps often reflect broader structural inequalities and inherited systems from colonial education models, where automatic promotion and repetition function not as pedagogical strategies but as bureaucratic tools. By examining how these mechanisms operate at the level of student experience, this study offers transferable insights for policymakers and educators in systems where educational decision-making remains top-down and disconnected from learners' needs.

2.5 Labelling Theory as a Lens for Understanding Grade Repetition

Labelling theory provides a useful framework for examining the experiences of students who have repeated a year. Importantly, the implications of labelling theory are not limited to Ghana. The way students internalize labels of failure or underperformance is a global issue in schooling. In diverse settings—from the United States to Portugal to Sub-Saharan Africa—the label of “repeater” carries symbolic weight that can influence peer relationships, teacher expectations, and self-concept. By understanding how these labels function and are sometimes resisted, educators across contexts can develop more affirming practices that reduce disengagement and dropout risk. This sociological theory, pioneered by Howard Becker (1973), posits that deviance is not an inherent characteristic of an act itself, but rather a label conferred by societal reactions to that act. Once an individual is labelled as "deviant," it can profoundly shape their self-concept and future behaviours, often leading to further deviance and social exclusion.

In the educational context, labelling students as "low performing" or "repeaters" can have significant consequences. As Rist (1977) notes, academic institutions play a crucial role in "sorting, labelling, tracking, and channelling persons along various routes depending upon the assessment the institution has made of the individual" (p. 155). The label of "grade repeater" can become a powerful determinant of a student's perceived capabilities, opportunities, and eventual academic success or failure. Labelling theory suggests that the act of repeating a year is not inherently problematic; rather, it is the social meaning and stigma attached to this label that can shape a student's experiences and outcomes. The subjective nature of labelling means that some students may be labelled as "repeaters" even when their academic performance does not warrant such a designation, while others may avoid this label despite facing similar challenges.

The implications of labelling can be far-reaching and self-reinforcing. As Messiou (2012) argues, the process of labelling can contribute to marginalisation, weakening the links between individuals and the rest of society. This aligns with Blumer's (1969) concept of symbolic interactionism, which posits that people act towards things based on the meanings those things have for them, and these meanings arise from social interactions.

When students are labelled as "repeaters," it can shape how they perceive themselves and how others perceive and interact with them. This labelling process can lead to a range of negative consequences, including social stigma, lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy, and a diminished sense of belonging in the school community (Pipa & Peixoto 2022; Santos et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2010). These experiences can further reinforce the label and contribute to a cycle of disengagement and underachievement. However, labelling theory also recognises that labels can be contested, negotiated, and potentially transformed through social interactions and institutional practices. As Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) suggest, labels can sometimes open up opportunities and increase awareness, rather than solely serving as sources of stigma.

In the context of this study, labelling theory will be used as a lens to examine how students who have repeated a year make sense of and respond to this label. It will explore the social meanings and stigma associated with grade repetition, as well as the potential for protective factors and supportive practices to mitigate or reshape these labels. By centring the voices and lived experiences of students who have been labelled as "repeaters," this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay between labelling processes, institutional practices, and individual agency. It will investigate how the label of "repeater" shapes students' self-perceptions, interactions with peers and teachers, and overall educational experiences. Furthermore, the study will examine the role of societal and institutional factors in reinforcing or challenging this label, as well as the potential for alternative approaches that prioritise individualised support and student empowerment over stigmatising labels.

Ultimately, by utilising labelling theory as a guiding framework, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of students who have repeated a year, and to inform efforts to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments for all students, regardless of the labels they may carry.

3. *Methods*

This article presents a qualitative case study (Yin 2014) that explores perspectives and experiences of students regarding grade repetition in Ghana. Following an interpretivist approach, this research was interested in the meaning repeating students made of their repetition experience. Research on the lived experiences of students is important as it can “give educators a visualization of the personal impact of retention” (Smith & Herzog 2014, 58-59). The student perspective is also appropriate in this instance as, despite guidance suggesting repetition decisions in Ghana are made by teachers in concert with parents, past studies indicate Ghanaian students report a fair amount of autonomy in making the repetition decisions (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah 2009; Eric 2020).

Participants for this study include repeater students from the basic education level. The basic level is chosen as it has a higher level of repeater students than the high school level. The basic level in Ghana includes two years of kindergarten, six years of primary school, and three years of junior high school. Purposive sampling was used to select students that have repeated at least one year of school. The final sample of 40 students included 22 males and 18 females, with ages ranging from 10 to 18 years old. Although the official age range for the final year of junior high school in Ghana is 14, some students interviewed were older due to their repeated year(s). The time lapse since repeating a grade varied among the students, with some repeating their current year and others reporting repetition ranging from one to five years ago.

As Yin (2014) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13), the context in which students live and are educated is important. All selected participants in this study were students in schools located within the Nkwanta South district. We settled on Nkwanta South because of the high percentage (41%) of the population who had never attended any school. Additionally, data from the 2010 national census showed that over 80% of all those with some education in Nkwanta South District did not go beyond basic education (Ghana Statistical Service 2013). The lead researcher's access to key officers within the district, as well as the high levels of educational disadvantage, was important in selecting the district. The research focused on public schools within the district as they tend to have lower levels of school achievement relative to private schools in Ghana.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted to collect students' lived experiences. This offered the interviewees the flexibility to communicate their views while being guided by the overarching aim of the research. All interviews were conducted by two research assistants to the project who doubled as teachers in schools within the district. They were selected based on their knowledge of education within the district and knowledge of local languages (Twi and Ewe). The duration of all interviews ranged from 30

minutes to 1 hour. All interviews were conducted in English (the official language used in schools), but students were given the freedom to switch to any of the two local languages if they chose. Research assistants were each given training sessions by the lead researcher on the overview of the work, expectations of the research work, as well as the remuneration package for performing the task. Additionally, they were taken through briefing and debriefing during data collection, handling of voice recorders and translation, and the management of ethical issues. All interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewees and transcribed.

The data analysis stage of this article involved “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (Bogdan & Biklen 1982, 145). Initial codes were generated by reading and rereading interview transcripts and field notes. Coding was done manually without the help of any software. The next step involved reviewing constructed codes against those present in the literature. Final steps included focusing on emerging themes that helped answer the research question. In the end, specific quotations that better emphasized some of the emerging themes were selected.

Ethical clearance was granted by the university ethics committee. Access to the interviewees was granted firstly through school heads in the selected schools. Parents and guardians also gave permission before selected students were interviewed. Lastly, the students selected gave express permission before taking part in the research. All names used in this work are pseudonyms as a way of protecting the identity of all informants. Additionally, research assistants were trained and made to sign a confidentiality form as a way of also making sure that informants' information was protected. Those involved in the research prior to the start were educated on the very essence of the research, how information was to be deployed, and how their data were to be kept safe. These assurances ensured that information collected was voluntary and free of coercion.

4. Results

4.1. Introduction:

In this section, we present the results of our investigation into the communication of grade repetition to students. Through interviews with students who have experienced grade repetition, we aim to provide insights into their initial reactions, the support received from parents and teachers, and the causes underlying grade repetition. The students' perspectives shed light on the emotional impact of grade repetition and the challenges they face during this process. Understanding these results is crucial for developing effective strategies to support students and mitigate the negative consequences associated with grade repetition.

4.2. *Communicating grade repetition to Students*

In most cases students only get to know about the decision to be repeated when report cards are distributed at the end of the academic year, when who are deemed to have mastered the curricula material are promoted to the next level. The report card gives an assessment of student performances across all subjects.

I was repeated in primary six when I was supposed to be promoted to JHS one and I was made to repeat class six. I found out I was repeated on my report card. There is a space on the report card written, promoted to in the space it was written repeated” (Interview with Razak).

In many cases students are made to invite parents for meeting with teachers and head teachers in the school to inform them about the decision to repeat their children. Reports from many students interviewed demonstrated that, parents and guardians were important in the decision-making process. Schools in most cases sought the consent of parents before finalizing grade repetition of affected students.

What I remember was that the head teacher said to us at assembly that if u fail the forthcoming examination u will be repeated your class. So, after the examination we were made to bring either of our parents. They needed their consent to repeat a group of us who did not do well in the exams. I was part because I did not too well in the examination (Interview with Jasper).

Involving parents in the grade repetition decision also helped parents become involved in the learning activities of the children at home. It took away the fear children felt in having to go break such news to their parents. For example, one student (Isaac) noted that “I felt very sad and even cried. I didn’t know how to tell my parents because I was afraid of their reaction towards my retention, so it took me some days to be able to tell my mother”.

There were a few interviews where students mentioned that their parents' consent was not sought when it came to grade repetition decisions. Instead, the students would only become aware of the decision through their report cards. This lack of parental involvement in grade repetition decisions placed an additional burden and created fear for students, as they had to break the news to their parents themselves. However, when parents were involved, teachers were able to explain the reasoning behind the decision and convince parents of its merits.

In all interviews, it was evident that students were unclear about the specific benchmarks or criteria used for grade repetition.

4.3. *Reaction to the news of being repeated.*

During the interviews, all students expressed extreme unhappiness and disappointment upon learning about their grade repetition. The reasons for their discontent varied, encompassing concerns such as the fear of losing friendships, being subjected to teasing, potential criticism from parents, as well as having to restart the same academic grade from the beginning. One student (Asamoah) shared, “I knew my performance was a bit down, but I didn’t take it as a struggle, so I didn’t pay attention to it until I was repeated. I felt very bad. At that time, it felt like my time had been wasted because I had to remain in the same class for another academic year.” Another student (Fosu) expressed, “I was unhappy about it because my friends were laughing at me. I felt sad when I realized I was going to be repeated”.

In addition, some students exhibited fear upon initially hearing about their grade repetition. This fear stemmed from concerns about potential negative reactions from their parents, particularly among students whose parents or guardians were highly invested in their education. For instance, during an interview with Kwakwa, he shared

that, “my dad and my mum are not educated, so they didn't really know what was happening. When I was asked to bring my parents to school, I didn't, out of fear that they would scold me”.

The students' experiences reflect a range of emotional and psychological challenges associated with grade repetition, including feelings of disappointment, social stigma, and apprehension regarding parental reactions. These first-hand accounts shed light on the significant impact of grade repetition on students' well-being and highlight the need for effective support systems to address their concerns and alleviate the negative consequences of this practice.

During two interviews, it was observed that some students responded to grade repetition by choosing to stay at home, only returning to school after being persuaded by their parents and teachers. One student (Ansah) shared their experience, stating, “I was down and very worried. It took me a few days to gather the courage to return to school. Our teacher came to me and assured me that it wasn't the end for me, but rather an opportunity to better prepare for the final school leaving examination”.

A few of the students interviewed shared that they were compelled to leave the school that had decided to repeat them. They expressed their inability to endure the shame associated with grade repetition and the potential teasing and labelling they might face as a result. According to these interviews, these students managed to convince their parents to move them to different schools. They were even willing to drop out of school if their request for a school change was not granted. One student (Kosi) shared their experience, stating, “was very unhappy about it, especially because my friends were mocking me. I had to change schools and start all over again in a new school, in the same grade that I was repeated in my previous school”.

These accounts illustrate the immense emotional impact that grade repetition can have on students, leading some of them to make difficult decisions such as leaving their familiar school environment. It highlights the importance of considering the psychological well-being and social dynamics of students who experience grade repetition, as the negative consequences can extend beyond academic challenges.

The initial response of students to grade repetition was one of disappointment, as discussed earlier. However, the support received from parents and teachers played a

crucial role in helping them overcome this initial disappointment. The idea of not being in the same class as their peers and the potential stigma associated with being a repeated student were factors that negatively affected the students. Some students also viewed grade repetition as a waste of their time since they would have to learn the same things all over again. One student (Bonsu) shared her experience with grade repetition, saying, “I felt very bad. I felt like my time had been wasted because I had to be in the same class for another academic year”.

For students who had experienced grade repetition, discussing the topic initially made them uncomfortable. The negative experience of repetition made it challenging for them to open up about it. However, over time, they seemed to heal and adapt to their situation, becoming more comfortable discussing the issue. As one student (Abed) expressed, “It is okay to talk about it. At first, it was difficult, but now it is okay”. These accounts shed light on the emotional journey that students go through when facing grade repetition.

4.4.

Causes of Grade Repetition

In general, students were aware that if they did not perform well academically, there was a risk of being repeated. As a result, many students who were repeated already had an understanding that their performance was not satisfactory, and they were not surprised by the repetition. However, beyond this general awareness of not doing well, they were uncertain about the specific benchmarks or criteria for grade repetition. This lack of clarity regarding the grade repetition standards posed a problem because some students who were repeated argued that while they knew they were not performing well, they did not have a clear understanding of the benchmark they needed to reach to improve.

During the interviews, most students were able to identify the reasons for their retention. They acknowledged that their poor academic performance was the main factor leading to their repetition. In many cases, these students had received prior notifications from teachers and principals regarding their unsatisfactory academic achievement. However, behind the overarching reason of low academic achievement, there were various

individual factors and environmental factors that affected the students' progress in school.

There were a few students interviewed who expressed the belief that school was not suited for them, and this perception had a negative impact on their commitment to schoolwork and other academic activities. One student (Adom) shared their experience by saying, “I felt schooling wasn't for me because I didn't understand almost everything that was taught in class”.

Some students also mentioned that they did not see a direct connection between their current schoolwork and their future job prospects. This lack of perceived relevance affected their motivation to put effort into their studies. Ben, for example, explained, “I was unhappy, but it was my teachers who really helped me out of it. I didn't find schooling beneficial because I wanted to learn a trade and become a caterer. My teachers helped me realize that taking my studies seriously would make me a better caterer”.

Additionally, a few students pointed out that they were deprived of extra support because they could not afford the associated costs. Schools offered additional tuition outside regular school hours for students who were perceived as struggling, but participation required payment. Bright, one of the students, expressed, “before the exams, classes were organized for struggling students, but I didn't take part because I didn't have the money to pay”.

Some students attributed their poor academic performance to factors such as not living with their parents and having a heavy workload at home. They felt that the lack of interest from non-biological parents in their education, combined with the demands of household chores and work, had a negative impact on their school performance. Brada shared, “my auntie, with whom I stay, didn't even know I was repeated because she didn't care... Life at home before my repetition was all about work. My auntie sells Kenkey, so there was almost always work for me to do at home and little time to rest or learn”.

Furthermore, one student, Courage, revealed that a personal loss within their family significantly affected their academic performance. They explained, “in Basic Seven, I lost my twin brother, and I decided I was not going back to school, so I think that affected my performance in class. The school authorities may not have known I was struggling until my exam results”. These testimonies shed light on the various challenges and circumstances that impact students' academic performance.

4.5. Effectiveness of grade repetition

The experiences of most students who repeated a grade showed that grade repetition was beneficial to them. Many participants noted an improvement in their academic performance and believed that grade retention was a useful policy that enhanced the achievement of struggling students. These children saw grade repetition as an opportunity to learn the things they didn't understand during their first year in the same class. Kunsu expressed this sentiment, saying, “it was retention that really brought out the best in me. I wasn't taking my studies seriously, but after repeating the grade, I saw a significant improvement in my performance” Another student (Bright) stated, “I want to be a banker, so I am working hard to achieve that goal. I am a better student now because I repeated a grade. I can now learn at home after school, and I manage my time better than before”. However, most interviewed students quickly attributed their positive change to a shift in the support system and the involvement of various stakeholders. The success of grade repetition, as described in the interviews, depended on the support provided to students, which previously did not exist.

In many cases, repetition changed parental behavior toward their children's academic life. Repeated students noted that their parents began to encourage and support them more and became more involved in their studies at home. Parents also took steps to address some of the underlying causes of their children's repetition. Some ensured that their children were no longer overwhelmed with household chores. Ama, shared her experience, saying, “before my repetition, there wasn't much pressure to learn at home, and I had too many chores that took up a lot of my time. But after repeating and changing schools, my father made time to help me study at home and frequently visited me at school to check on my performance”. In other instances, parental involvement in their

children's academics after grade repetition involved paying for additional support. Afua mentioned, “after the repetition, my father hired a teacher to help me with my studies”.

During the interviews, some students recounted how schools organized extra tuition before and after regular school hours for repeated students. This additional support proved highly beneficial in improving the academic performance of those who repeated a grade. Students spoke highly of the extra classes they received and the positive impact they had on their academic progress. Razak said, “The school provided us with extra classes for those of us who were repeated. We had morning classes before the normal school day began, and it really helped”.

In a minority of cases, class teachers also paid more attention to repeated students, leading to improved performance. Dora shared that, “in my second year of the grade, I received a lot of attention from my teachers, and they were very supportive. Although I'm still not an exceptional student, I'm better than before”.

Not only teachers and parents offered support to repeated students, but fellow students also played crucial roles in their lives, according to many of the interviews. Teachers paired relatively academically strong students with those who repeated a grade. These students provided explanations and support when teachers were not available. Abass explained, “I have classmates who study with me, and my brother helps me with my assignments. They have been instrumental in helping me succeed in school”.

However, a few of the students interviewed questioned the effectiveness of grade repetition in addressing low academic achievement. Their arguments centred on the fact that many of them had been repeated on two or more occasions. They felt that if grade repetition were truly effective, students would only need to repeat a grade once, rather than multiple times as they experienced.

4.6. *Recommendations on whether to repeat or not.*

Students were asked about their recommendations regarding grade repetition during the interviews. The majority of students interviewed strongly believed that grade repetition was crucial for students with low academic achievement and wholeheartedly endorsed it. Abena expressed this sentiment, stating, “repetition is good for struggling students, and when they are repeated, they should receive more attention.” However, a few students had reservations about recommending grade repetition. Afua, for instance, shared her perspective, saying, “I feel it's normal, but it should be meant for struggling students, not everyone. I think the repetition has set back my plans by a year, but it's okay. It was a painful experience for me because I still feel that I didn't deserve to be repeated at that time”.

In an exceptional case, one student raised concerns about the entire process of grade repetition. This student questioned why the change in attitude and the additional support systems made available to students after repetition were not provided to them before repetition occurred. It is suggested that struggling students should be identified and given the necessary help, even if it doesn't involve grade repetition.

Other students also recommended grade repetition, but with certain conditions. These conditions included obtaining parental consent before repetition, receiving increased support from teachers after repetition, informing students in advance about the possibility of repetition, and preventing repeated students from being repeated. Lorna stated, “I think repetition is good, but when you are repeated, I think you need to be encouraged and supported.” Kwame recommended, “I suggest that parents should give consent for their struggling children in school to be repeated.” Furthermore, it was suggested that school authorities should inform students ahead of time if they are at risk of repetition, rather than it being a surprise.

In summary, while many students supported grade repetition, there were reservations and suggestions for improvement. It is important to consider parental consent, provide ongoing support for repeated students, inform students in advance, and ensure that grade repetition is targeted at struggling students rather than being a general practice. The findings suggest that grade repetition should be used as a last resort, and only after other interventions have been unsuccessful. When grade repetition is used, it is important to provide students with the support they need to succeed in the next grade.

Concluding Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate the impact that labelling processes can have on the lived experiences of students who have repeated a grade. Through the lens of labelling theory (Becker 1973), it becomes evident that the act of grade repetition itself is not inherently problematic; rather, it is the social meanings and stigma attached to the "repeater" label that shape students' educational journeys in complex and multifaceted ways. These dynamics are not unique to Ghana but reflect broader patterns observed in diverse educational systems, from Kenya (Zuilkowski et al., 2016) to Portugal (Santos et al., 2022), where institutional labels similarly marginalize students.

Labelling theory posits that deviance is not an inherent characteristic of an act but a label conferred by societal reactions (Becker 1973). In the context of this study, the label of "repeater" was primarily imposed upon students by teachers, often without their awareness or input, and with limited parental involvement. This top-down imposition mirrors systemic issues in other post-colonial education systems, such as Malawi and Ethiopia (Sunny et al., 2017; Crouch et al., 2022), where repetition functions less as a pedagogical tool and more as a bureaucratic response to overcrowded classrooms and high-stakes testing. The label of "repeater" became a powerful determinant of how students perceived their own capabilities and future opportunities, as well as how they were perceived and treated by others within the school community.

Consistent with Messiou's (2012) perspective, the labelling of students as "repeaters" contributed to their marginalization and weakened their connections with the school community. Students reported experiences of stigmatization, diminished self-efficacy, and a decreased sense of belonging, echoing the negative consequences documented in studies from Kenya (Zuilkowski et al. 2016) and Ghana (Dunne & Ananga 2013). These experiences are illustrative of the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969), which posits that individuals act towards things based on the meanings those things have for them, and these meanings arise from social interactions.

While the study is rooted in a specific national context, the core insight that students internalize educational labels in ways that influence their academic and emotional engagement speaks to broader concerns across schooling systems. In both highly structured and low-resource environments, the labelling of students—whether as repeaters, underachievers, or at-risk—can trigger exclusionary dynamics that affect motivation and belonging. As such, the experiences described by students in this study echo international findings that caution against deficit-oriented framing in education (OECD 2018; Santos et al. 2022).

The labelling process, facilitated by symbolic interactions with peers and teachers, shaped how students perceived themselves and how others perceived and interacted

with them. For instance, students reported being mocked and laughed at by their peers, leading to feelings of social stigma and a diminished sense of belonging within the school community. This resonates with the notion that labels can contribute to the marginalisation of individuals, weakening their ties to society (Messiou 2012). However, the study also revealed the potential for protective factors and supportive practices to mitigate the negative effects of labelling and reshape the meanings attached to the "repeater" label. Parental involvement, teacher support, and school-wide interventions played crucial roles in keeping repeated students engaged in their education and fostering more positive self-perceptions and experiences. This mirrors evidence from the U.S. (Smith & Herzog, 2014) and Belgium (Canegem et al., 2021), where relational support systems—rather than repetition itself—determined long-term outcomes. When parents were informed and involved in the repetition decision-making process, it reduced students' anxiety and increased their sense of support. This aligns with Smith and Herzog's (2014) findings on the importance of family interventions following repetition, as the impact of labelling can be mitigated or exacerbated by the responses and interventions of significant others. Additionally, positive interactions with teachers, such as offering reassurance and providing extra attention and resources, contributed to students perceiving schools as more positive environments. This resonates with Lauchlan and Boyle's (2007) assertion that labels can sometimes open up opportunities and increase awareness, rather than solely serving as sources of stigma. By challenging the negative connotations associated with the "repeater" label and offering support and encouragement, teachers played a crucial role in shaping students' experiences and self-perceptions.

Nonetheless, the study also highlighted the persistent challenges posed by labelling processes and the influence of societal and institutional factors. The identity of guardians and their attitudes towards education influenced the level of support received by students, with non-biological guardians prioritising domestic work over schoolwork. This aligns with Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah's (2009) observations and underscores how societal and cultural norms can reinforce or challenge the meanings attached to labels like "repeater." The interaction between family dynamics, economic constraints, and school engagement is particularly salient in low- and middle-income contexts, where caregiving arrangements are often fluid and educational responsibility may be shared or deprioritized. These findings may thus inform broader policy strategies that recognize the interdependence between home environments and academic resilience.

Furthermore, the positive experiences reported by participants may be partially attributed to the unique aspects of the study design. As the sample consisted of repeated students who remained in school, they represent a subset of "success stories" who avoided dropping out, which is a common consequence of the "repeater" label (Canegem et al. 2021; Jimerson et al. 2002). Additionally, the retrospective nature of

the interviews and the time elapsed since repetition may have contributed to more positive reflections, as suggested by Smith and Herzog (2014) and Kretschmann et al. (2019). This highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of labelling effects over time, as the immediate negative impact of labelling may diminish or be reshaped through subsequent experiences and interventions. The implications of this study go beyond Ghana's borders. They speak to the need for education systems globally to consider how institutional practices—such as grade repetition, performance tracking, or exclusionary language—contribute to the reproduction of inequality through subtle social processes like labelling.

Moving forward, it is important to consider the role of labelling theory in informing efforts to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments. Recognizing the power of labels and their potential to shape students' experiences and outcomes is essential. Interventions should focus not only on academic support but also on challenging the stigma associated with labels like "repeater" and fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment for all students. Collaborative approaches involving students, parents, teachers, and school administrators could help deconstruct harmful labels and promote more holistic and individualized support systems. By centering student voices and lived experiences, educational institutions can gain deeper insights into the impact of labelling processes and develop strategies to mitigate their negative consequences. This could involve critically examining the language and practices used in decision-making processes, as well as promoting open dialogues and inclusive policies that empower students and challenge stigmatizing labels.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies that stratify samples based on the time elapsed since repetition and compare the experiences of repeaters and non-repeaters could provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of labelling effects over time. Such studies could explore how the impact of labelling evolves as students navigate different stages of their educational journey and how institutional and societal factors interact with labelling processes to shape long-term outcomes.

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice—not only within Ghana but also for other education systems navigating the complex tensions between automatic promotion, repetition, and student retention. While this study is Ghana specific, it raises broader considerations: first, that grade repetition often reflects deeper systemic issues such as teacher preparedness and insufficient remedial support; second, that the process of labelling can have long-lasting psychosocial consequences that are underestimated in policy discussions; and third, that early and sustained support—especially from parents and teachers—can help reframe repetition from punishment to opportunity. These considerations may resonate with

other education systems where high-stakes exams and limited resources shape student trajectories.

Policymakers should consider implementing more flexible promotion policies that prioritize individualized support over blanket retention practices. This could involve developing comprehensive early intervention strategies to identify and assist struggling students before repetition becomes necessary. These strategies are especially relevant in systems where high-stakes testing, teacher shortages, and limited remedial infrastructure constrain learner progress—challenges that span across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America (UIS 2012; Crouch et al. 2022). Educational institutions should foster inclusive environments that mitigate the stigmatizing effects of labelling, potentially through professional development programs that sensitize educators to the impact of labelling on student experiences and outcomes. Additionally, schools could implement peer mentoring programs and targeted academic support for repeated students, as these emerged as protective factors in this study. At a systemic level, education ministries should consider revising assessment practices to incorporate more formative approaches that support continuous learning rather than relying solely on high-stakes examinations for promotion decisions. Furthermore, policies should mandate increased parental involvement in the grade repetition decision-making process and subsequent support strategies. These recommendations align with UNESCO's (2015) call for more inclusive and equitable quality education, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive interventions that address the complex interplay between labelling processes, institutional practices, and student outcomes.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of employing a critical lens, such as labelling theory, to understand and address the complex challenges faced by students who have repeated a grade. By acknowledging the social construction of labels and their potential to marginalise and stigmatise, stakeholders in the educational system can work towards creating environments that prioritise support, empowerment, and inclusive practices for all students, regardless of the labels they may carry. Through a deeper understanding of labelling processes and their implications, educational institutions can foster a culture of acceptance, promote positive self-perceptions, and equip students with the resources and support they need to thrive academically and personally.

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